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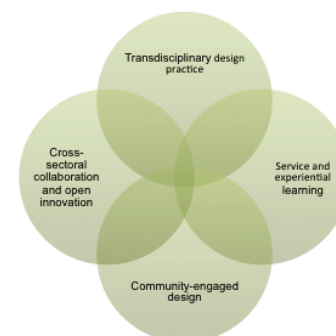
Service-Learning in Design, Creating Meaningful Community-Engagement in the Studio.

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VCUarts Middle of Broad Studio (mOb) represents a model of meaningful Service-learning for undergraduate design students. Service-learning at VCU is defined as “a credit-bearing experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets community-identified needs. Service-learning courses require completion of 20 hours of volunteer service in addition to course assignments.” Students in mOb complete 55-70 hours of service or more each semester. This direct experience professionally managing, communicating, and creating design projects moves students into active learning. Data from VCUarts’ participation in the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) shows that the most important tool students need to be successful in art and design careers is skill-based applied experience beyond course work. This paper examines a service-learning, community-engaged model offered in an undergraduate trans-disciplinary design course.

David Kolb (1984) proposes a model of experiential learning, which is student centered. Kolb’s model is a four-stage process. Students at mOb complete a similar cycle with an expanded input of hours and project feedback. By aligning service with meaningful content, students deliver high-quality design solutions to clients with a higher level of contact with and investment in the community. These class projects and workshops allow students to blossom as designers and seek new solutions as peers with faculty and mentors.



The first class of each semester introduces students to a project portfolio; each project has a brief including outcomes and client background. Students discuss and select interest areas and teams are created. Within the first week, student managers meet with clients, talk with stakeholders and mentors, and begin research and ideation. Because mOb students are completing semester long projects, ample opportunity is given for reflection in the form of discussions, critiques, and project pin-ups. Students’ abstract conceptualization is tested when student concepts are developed in studio and critiques. Unlike the Kolb model, learning at mOb has a concrete outcome in a client centered project that requires a critical process, including the input of the community the projects is intended to serve.

Trans disciplinary broad based education is very different than specialized studio education. Trans disciplinary work typically occurs in two ways. In the first instance students are educated across disciplines in a liberal arts model. Each student becomes a generalist, making connections across a broad knowledge base, able to listen fully with great empathy to the needs of a situation. In the second instance, a team of specialists in varying disciplines is assembled to tackle a project. Specialists bring deep knowledge from their specialty to solve a complex problem.

Students in the mOb studio are empowered as project managers as well as designers. As project leaders, students must frame the problem, and oversee the diverse needs of the project and team. In this role, they become effective listeners and diagnosticians. This position is rarely addressed in a traditional design studio where team projects are usually developed as groups of equals, lacking the hierarchy to effectively move a project forward. Students enter into projects in the mOb studio at a level that might take several years to reach through the traditional entry-level position. The structure of the studio also allows students to receive more guidance, mentoring and provocation from faculty, and mentors than they would receive in a design office or traditional academic setting.

An additional opportunity for students to take a leap in project responsibility is achieved by projects that lend themselves to student engagement. Small projects are not profitable in a traditional design practice and speculative projects are infrequently taken on. mOb students initiate projects where they observe the lack of design in their city or the need for improved design. These projects are innovative by their nature, and bring unique perspectives from fashion, graphic, interior design, and other arts disciplines. In these projects, students identify community-based need and practice leadership skills within a larger realm than the studio. Attendance at civic meetings, neighborhood workshops, teaching and event co-creation with clients are some of the projects students take active leadership roles in.

National statistics report that 60% of degree seeking students fail to earn a bachelors degree in 6 years. VCU data (VCU 2013-14 Service-Learning Impact Measure Report) shows that students who complete even one service-learning course are more likely to graduate than those who take no Service-learning courses. Additionally, students believe that their service-learning class participation improved their ability to work collaboratively in groups, their awareness of the needs of in the community, and their capacity to have an impact on social problems. Service-learning opportunities exist in each community and selecting a meaningful opportunity for student collaboration does require faculty work. However, once established, these partnerships strengthen institutional, faculty, community and professional ties in a mutually beneficial cycle.

Graduates of the studio self-report the effect Service-learning has had on their choices after graduation. Many report the experience has created professional opportunity and skills that have assisted them in their job search and careers. Others have indicated their work with community-engaged, service-learning projects has provided them with a desire to design and serve in non-profits or in non-traditional design roles. Additional outcomes have been student retention in the studio over multiple semesters, and graduates intention to begin design careers in the Richmond community. A Service-learning experience can become one of the most meaningful tools programs can incorporate into curriculums. In a landscape where students may shift their career focus up to 12 times, the deliverables of Service-learning classes are meaningful to students and potential employers. Graduates with applied skills in communication and teamwork, and with an investment in client centered needs are better prepared to practice their craft, in industry, academia or the non-profit sector. These students are graduating with the knowledge that design can make a positive impact in their lives and those of their fellow citizens.